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CAPITOL SPOTLIGHT
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"JAMES WATT: No Celebration Yet"

Most Americans are pleased that former Secretary of the Interior, James Watt, has left the President's Cabinet. However, the disappearance of one particularly obnoxious Cabinet official may bring fewer gains than many people expect. After all, the fundamental policies of James Watt were set by, and always supported by, President Ronald Reagan.

Like most people, I was offended and angered at Watt's outrageous public statements. I was not amused by his division of people into "liberals and Americans". I could not take lightly his comparison of those of us with different views than his on the abortion issue with Germans who "lived in the towns near Auschwitz and Dachau and did not get involved". Nor could I excuse as archaic the "joke" about "a black, a woman, two Jews, and a cripple". However, in the final analysis, Watt's environmental policies did far more harm than his ill-chosen words.

Some readers may mistakenly assume that my differences with James Watt were mainly a matter of partisan disagreement. This was not the case. His policies represented a radical change in the role the Department of the Interior played in recent administrations under both Republican and Democratic presidents.

Under Watt, the Federal Government became an open and totally involved ally of those business interests which must work through the Department of the Interior. Lobbyists and executives of the nation's major oil, coal, gas, lumber, and mining interests functioned as officials of the Government of the United States.

No attempt was made by Watt or those under him to conceal the fact that they had been authorized by President Reagan to help American businesses make money by exploiting our natural resources.

Were it not for opposition from Congress and repeated negative court rulings, the Watt years would have been even more disastrous. The Los Angeles Times characterized Watt as "...a liquidator...". Whether the resource was off-shore oil or gas, timber or coal, or other mineral he was bent on selling it off to the highest bidder in the shortest time.

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Unfortunately, there is absolutely no evidence that Ronald Reagan intends to depart from Watt's basic policies. The President did not "accept" Watt's resignation because he disapproved of Watt's environmental policies. Watt was forced to resign primarily because of his blatant public displays of bigotry made him a political liability for the President and for the Republican Party.

If the new Secretary of the Interior is a mild-mannered, bland, courteous, colorless man or woman the Watt problem will be solved for the present. Sadly, many Americans will forget Watt ever existed even if his policies are continued without the slightest alteration. The most naive voters might even give the President special credit if the new Secretary turned out to be a woman, a member of a minority group, or someone labeled by the press a "moderate".

What we need is not just to be rid of Watt, but to get rid of Wattism. During the next year, we should pay far more attention to Interior Department policies than to the personality of the Secretary of the Interior.

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